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Testimony of

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Re-opening of the U.S. Postal Service's  
Brentwood Processing and Distribution Center

Before the

Committee on Government Reform  
U.S. House of Representatives

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**Congressional Testimony**

Good afternoon. My name is Myke Reid. I am the Legislative Assistant Director of the American Postal Workers Union, which represents approximately 330,000 clerk, maintenance and motor vehicle craft employees of the Postal Service nationwide. I am testifying today on behalf of APWU President William Burrus, who is out of town to attend a national APWU conference.

I'd like to thank Chairman Davis, Ranking Minority member Waxman, and the other committee members for the opportunity to speak on this most important issue: the re-opening of the Brentwood Road Processing and Distribution Center. I'd like to thank you for your continuing interest in the safety of the mail, of postal employees, and the American public.

When the anthrax crisis arose in October 2001, the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> were still vivid, and our nation was reeling. On Oct. 5, 2001, a tabloid-newspaper employee in Florida became the nation's first inhalation anthrax fatality from a terrorist act. Ten days later, anthrax-contaminated mail was discovered in Sen. Tom Daschle's office on Capitol Hill. Brentwood postal worker Thomas Morris died on Oct. 21, and the facility was immediately shut down. Joseph Curseen, another Brentwood employee, died the following day.

Until the tragic deaths of these two postal workers, there were conflicting opinions within the scientific community regarding the danger of anthrax escaping from a sealed envelope.

We have certainly traveled a long road to get to the point where we are finally anticipating the re-opening of the Brentwood Road facility, which has been renamed to honor the two fallen postal workers, Joseph P. Curseen Jr. and Thomas L. Morris Jr.

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APWU members Curseen and Morris were among the tens of thousands of postal workers exposed to the deadly biological agent during terrorist attacks on our nation's mail. The terror was not confined to postal workers – a Bronx, New York, woman died Oct. 31, 2001, and a 94-year-old woman in a rural area of Connecticut died Nov. 21, 2001, both from exposure to anthrax believed to have been released in the nation's mail system. Hundreds of thousands of postal workers were terrified, and millions of American citizens were fearful as well.

The deaths of Curseen and Morris and the closing of the Brentwood facility were only the beginning of a long and difficult period for postal workers. Some are still suffering ill effects from the exposure and many still bear emotional scars. For two years, they have had to dramatically adjust to the disruption of their work life while struggling with the mental turmoil wrought by the attacks. I must say that by all accounts they have endured these hardships and remained dedicated to their mission.

As the anticipated re-opening approaches, workers are asking the question: Is the facility safe enough for me to return?

While there was cooperation between management and labor in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, there also have been serious breaches. The Environmental Clearance Committee cleared the facility for re-occupancy on Sept. 19, yet this information was not provided to the union until Oct. 20. While we're relieved to learn that the facility is deemed safe by the experts, we are troubled by the delay in sharing information.

Five months ago, APWU President Burrus testified before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations about the handling of the anthrax contamination at the Southern Connecticut processing center in Wallingford. That facility handled the tainted mail that resulted in the last-known anthrax-related death two years ago. Testing at the Wallingford facility shortly after the elderly woman's death revealed high concentrations of anthrax spores.

While there was no question that the amount of anthrax present in the Wallingford facility was sufficient to cause death, contamination was described to employees as being in "trace amounts."

The subcommittee hearing highlighted significant failures: Discussions were held among various agencies, including the Postal Service, the Centers for Disease Control, and the Connecticut Department of Health, regarding who would assume responsibility for notifying employees, yet the full extent of the contamination was not revealed to workers for more than a year. A GAO report issued last April notes that the Postal Service requested, and the investigation team agreed, that the USPS would be the sole party responsible for communicating test results and other information to the workers at the Connecticut facility. Still, the Postal Service withheld information about the level of contamination from its workers, despite a formal request made in January 2002 by local union officials.

At the hearing in May, Chairman Christopher Shays urged the agencies involved to apologize to the workers, yet, to date, no apology has been forthcoming.

The Wallingford situation was one of the most egregious violations of postal workers' rights in the two years since the anthrax incidents began, and it is why we are troubled by this recent breakdown in communication. It appears that the lessons learned were quickly forgotten.

The Mail Security Task Force – a working group of postal and union officials formed immediately after the anthrax attacks – has been holding discussions for some time about the decontamination of the Washington, DC, and Hamilton, New Jersey, facilities and the timetable for re-opening the Curseen-Morris facility. The Postal Service has presented an outline – but few details – on plans for re-opening the facility to workers. For example, the union has requested that medical and mental health professionals be made available to workers and that employees be educated about the health risks they may encounter. We await a commitment from the Postal Service.

The USPS has been communicating an overview of its re-opening plan to workers through work-floor talks, through letters mailed directly to their homes, and through a variety of postings at facilities where Brentwood Road employees temporarily have been working. We appreciate the increased communication, in spite of the lack of specifics.

The issue of whether individual employees will be required to return to work at the Brentwood Road facility was resolved through an agreement between the Postal Service and the APWU. It provides that employees of the renamed Curseen-Morris facility will be given one opportunity to indicate whether they wish to return to that facility or prefer to be reassigned to another facility. Employees who choose not to return will be reassigned either to existing job vacancies or to positions created to accommodate them within the metropolitan area.

Much has been done over the past two years, both to bring the Curseen-Morris facility back online and to ensure that other facilities are safe and made safer. We would especially like to commend the USPS efforts led by Vice President of Engineering Tom Day to decontaminate the Brentwood Road facility and for his involvement in the development of the Biological Detection Systems.

Overshadowing much of the progress in decontaminating the facility, however, is the fact that little has been accomplished to prevent a similar incident in the future. The mail processing and collection system is complex, and the installation of Biological Detection Systems (BDS) and HEPA filtration equipment provide only limited protection against exposure: Because more than 50 percent of all letter-mail is processed in presort mailing houses and bypasses the BDS, this equipment cannot be considered an adequate early warning system. And it must be remembered that at this time the BDS system tests only for anthrax.

Furthermore, the Biological Detection System may provide for a more rapid response in treating workers, but only *after* there has been an attack. Detection would occur only *after* a contaminated piece of mail has entered the system – only *after* workers have been exposed. Sounds grim, and it is.

Because postal workers are very dedicated to their jobs, they will continue to perform their duties. But they need more than a report suggesting that a workplace is safe to enter. They deserve to know that the responsible parties are dedicated to ensuring their safety and that progress is being made expeditiously. We urge the Postal Service to follow the recommendations of the Environmental Clearance Committee to continue monitoring the work environment after the facility is re-opened, and we urge the Postal Service to engage medical and mental health professionals to monitor employees for signs of post-traumatic stress.

For two years, the Brentwood Road workers not only have been displaced, they have had to cope with the fact that they were the victims of a terrorist attack – they were exposed to a biological hazard that killed two of their fellow workers and made others ill; the perpetrator has not been caught, and the long-term effects of this act are unknown. Now, in addition, they are hearing that some assignments may not be returned to the Curseen-Morris facility and the future of their work life remains uncertain.

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We urge the responsible parties to be especially sensitive to the needs of the employees of the Brentwood Road facility and to make every effort to accommodate them.

Again, I'd like thank the committee for this opportunity to present testimony, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.